

“I Share What I Know” - Community-based Chef Ana Lu Caro

Ana Lu Caro is a community-based chef originally from Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, now based in Berino, New Mexico. During her time participating in the Chihuahuan Desert Cultural Fellowship, Ana Lu was the kitchen manager at El Calvario United Methodist Church, a historic sanctuary that serves as a temporary shelter for refugees from multiple countries and cultures, in Las Cruces, New Mexico. With her staff and volunteers, she prepared hundreds of meals and made an effort to include culturally relevant and meaningful ingredients and listen to people’s stories.



We sat down with Ana Lu during the fellowship to learn more about her influences and cultural practice. The following are excerpts from our conversation, edited for length and clarity.

Background and Influences

One reason I’m working in the kitchen here is because my family had a restaurant in Juárez for 35 years. My family’s restaurant was a Chinese restaurant, so chop suey, chow mein, and fried rice really stand out in my mind. The cook was actually Chinese, and he would share his regional recipes - because every region in China has its own specific recipes.

Sometimes my memories of food and family make me cry. I’ve always had that connection with food. There was always a strong link there with bread. Wherever we went, they would be making bread everyday. I’ve also spent time in Oaxaca, Mexico. The food that stands out to me the most are the *mole* and the *chile colorado*—the Mole Oaxaqueño, because there are so many different varieties.



I’ve always been a sensitive person and not just through food. For example, at the church that I grew up with in Juárez, we learned that you need to share with your brothers. Also, one of my daughters knows a lot about restaurants. It kind of goes both ways. I’ve also influenced them to keep this going—helping through food. My daughters are a big support for me. Not only do they help with the food, but they’ve also helped me with my English. It was one of my daughters that actually helped me apply for this

fellowship. I would like to continue learning about it, because I love it. I've really enjoyed it.

I believe that all cultures have beauty, but what's most interesting is that culinary art can be shared. It's for everyone, you know. It could be enjoyed by anyone whether it's something very fancy or just a very simple taco.

Cultural Practice

The main thing at El Calvario is that we have to work miracles. The way it works is that we depend on people to donate. So whatever we have, we have to try to make the best of it. For example, if somebody is donating rice, we add corn or something else to give it another aspect. It all depends on what we have available and what was donated and what was still needed.

People come from Central America, Colombia, Venezuela, Panama. When people come to the shelter, we welcome them and give them whatever we have. Black beans, for example, unite all of these countries. Brazilian people eat black beans, but call them *feijoada*. Colombians and other people are used to eating black beans. We also cook lentils and get cherry tomatoes from the garden, Jardín de la Paz.

Tortillas and rice are all very important. For example, *arepas* are similar to the gorditas we eat here. They're a little bit different, but they're all connected and get rid of our hunger. It makes us happy for that reason. Everybody likes gorditas. So after they've come on this trip what they want is to have something like that, something that they're already used to. There is a phrase we use in Mexico that when your belly is full, problems seem to be less bad.

With kids here, we celebrate their birthdays. This also lifts up their self-esteem, because when they get here, a lot of them are completely drained and done. But when they get here, after their journey, we ask, "Oh, it's your birthday?" and bring them the cake. It just brings a big smile to their face. For example, if they all have a birthday in September, we celebrate at the same time. Once they're here, we can talk with them. We try to make them feel better. We tell them, "You're here now, you're safe. You can take a shower now." It helps them a lot. I would love to write a book about all of the stories I've been told.



There's always challenges here, because sometimes when people arrive they're ill. So there's always people doing all kinds of different things here, and you notice somebody could be over here feeding someone or somebody could be over there translating for one of the nurses. There's always many things to be done.

I want people to know that everything we do here is volunteering. So if they could help us out by bringing things we need the most, like rice, beans, and Maseca flour for bread. So that we can keep working with that.

At the garden here, last year, we planted radishes for pozole, cherry tomatoes we used for the lentils. We also planted little onions and squash. From what we planted in the garden last year, we were able to get a lot of use from it. I would like to continue volunteering more with the garden and continue what Anahi [from La Semilla's Community Education Program] taught us, to keep it going and focus more on that. But not so much as part of my job but more as volunteering. Since Anahi has already shown us how to do it, to continue growing and maybe add more lettuce, as well. It's also important, because they all have their own season. It's important to learn about each plant season.



Can you share a bit about your idea for writing a book?

Most of the women, when they first get here, they'll talk about all kinds of tragedies, you know, that they've lived. But once they're here, they can talk about other things. Once they're here, it's like their hearts have already lightened. They feel much better. Each woman has her own story to tell. Some stories are worse. I've heard so many things. I am still in contact with these women and they tell me, "Oh, you can [write] it, you should do this. Call me if you need me to tell you more." Maybe someday I can start, because I honestly have no idea where to even begin.

How do you connect with the Chihuahuan Desert ecosystem?

On the border, there is a lot of diversity among people and diversity of plants and food. We might have everything very Tex-Mex here, but you cross the border and there's barbacoa and all kinds of things. For example, in Juárez, there is a lot of diversity of people, like Indigenous people like the Rararumi, and we went on a hike at Hueco Tanks led by members of the Ysleta del Sur Pueblo. Even though there is diversity among all these people, there is still a connection there between the people here and the Rararumi over there. There are deep roots. There are also differences of language here, because, for example, there's different ways they talk in New Mexico. There's another way that they talk in El Paso and another in Juárez.

In my own home in my backyard, there's cactus that just pop up by themselves. I don't try to water them or don't take care of them. The difference with my front yard, I have grass I mow and water. I water the trees. So I can see the difference between the nature of those two. I struggle with the front yard. I have to keep it going, and it doesn't always work that way with the backyard, you know. Nature knows what to do. It's the resilience of those desert plants. By the time I turn my back on them, they're flowering. When it rains, it's beautiful. I tell them how beautiful they are. They're surviving back there. When I first moved here, my brother told me to plant gobernadora and it will grow everywhere.

In what ways is your cultural practice intergenerational?

When I do my work, I like to talk about it, and sometimes I even end up teaching it. So that's the way that I share with other people. My volunteer work is part of it. With my granddaughters or other people who are interested, I share what I know. For example, I'll share things like, "This salsa tastes better if you do this. This rice tastes better if you do this or this to it."

The people who come to El Calvario are of all ages, from children to teenagers. It's complicated and hard sometimes. Once the children and babies are here, they're tired sometimes. You can calm them down if you offer them yogurt or a cookie. You can comfort kids through food, because they're hungry. But there are toys, and there is a lady who takes the kids to the park. When they get here, they can forget about everything they've just been through. Once they come back from the park, they play and they're happy. We can give them their dinner. They calm down and can have a shower and then go to bed. How long they're here depends on whether they have family here that's going to support them. If they do, they sometimes leave right away. They can leave that same day or the next day. Some people take a few more days, and a few have stayed for ten days up to a month.



It affects you, but you also learn a lot. Food is important and connects us. When these kids arrive, they're tired and hungry, and they have some soup and *arepas*, and it makes all the

difference. In my work, I'm learning words in Portuguese, Dari, and Turkish. I enjoy it. It excites me and motivates me. Sometimes we communicate with signs, and that's how we learn to communicate with each other. Sometimes we laugh together, because we don't pronounce everything correctly. But we learn about each other's cultures.

What does this fellowship mean for you and your work?

It's very important for me, because I want to keep learning. I would also like to help to teach other people. When I first got the call, I was very happy that I had been accepted. I have found a kind of sisterhood and brotherhood with La Semilla.

I have lovely memories of recently when we went to Hueco Tanks. I hadn't seen a rattlesnake in its habitat.



That other trip to Juárez where I learned how to get colors from plants [at the Ni En More studio]. That was also lovely for me, I enjoyed it. I would be interested in trying to connect with people from Juárez. I'm not sure exactly how. But I would like to, because I know there are very talented people working there. I want to try to maybe produce something or do something productive for the city.



I'm very happy to be a part of this fellowship. I also feel very good, because I feel like somebody's noticing me and the work I've been doing and that I enjoy. I feel like I'm doing something good, helping people and for my society. You're teaching me, and I'm also teaching.

Which Chihuahuan Desert plans would you like to learn more about and/or like for others to know more about?

I'm really interested in learning about aloe vera. I know it's a good plant that has health benefits, and it's also very good for your skin. So I'm very interested in learning more about it and what you can do with it. I know that it's a plant that you can grow easily here or in Juárez.



El Calvario United Methodist Church aids refugees with basic needs, such as shelter, meals, and transportation to their final destinations. A longtime community partner with La Semilla, El Calvario also serves as a local community resource, providing cooking and gardening classes, in addition to their church services and a small local vendors market. The church houses a commercial kitchen incubator for local small-scale entrepreneurs and an urban garden, Jardín de Paz, which provides plots for harvest and education on garden desert-adapted techniques. To learn more about El Calvario and how to contribute/donate to their work, see their [Facebook page](#).

All photos from El Calvario were provided by Ana Lu Caro. Hueco Tanks and Ni En More photos provided by Rubi Orozco Santos. Profile photo by Michelle E. Carreon.